Walkthroughs

Rick Mohr, August 2013

Using just your voice, get a roomful of dancers to do something they've never done before.

The hallmark of great callers is consistent, clear, and concise walkthroughs of appropriately-challenging dances. It looks so easy, but how did they get there? After years of calling and talking with other callers I believe the secrets are **planning**, plus **trial and refinement**.

Ideas below marked CO are from Carol Ormand, BH from Bruce Hamilton, JP from Joseph Pimentel

Before the dance

- Plan an appropriate program. (This could occupy a full workshop by itself. But please make sure it's neither too easy nor too hard, and has plenty of variety.)
- For each dance make sure you understand who is where at every point. It can help to visualize the dance from the opposite gender role viewpoint.
- Study the dance to identify potential trouble spots. Don't forget smaller things (e.g. beginners don't know what "balance" or "neighbor" means).
- Plan the specific words you'll use to direct the dancers.
- Yes, really—plan the specific words you'll use to direct the dancers! For the trouble spots you've identified, work on a clear sequence of directions that will allow every dancer on the floor to get it. Listen to your candidate phrases from a dancer's point of view, and refine.
- Some things to think about when planning your words:
  - (BH) Ration syllables.
  - Always orient the dancers before specifying actions. ("Face your neighbor up and down the set", "Look at the couple on the right diagonal", "End the swing facing down the hall")
  - In confusing bits, consider a series of short moves where you control everyone's position and orientation. ("Men, allemande left each other once and a half. Now stand back to back in the middle facing your partner." They'll skip the second part in the dance, but it lets you orient everyone unambiguously for the next move.)
  - Introduce faces if it will help find the right person later. ("Take a look at your shadow, who is next to you in line. In a minute you'll need to find them.")
  - Add brief, vivid, style tips; dancers appreciate them if not belabored.
  - (CO) Help motivate dancers to want to do it your way. ("It's especially fun if…", "There's a really satisfying moment if…")
- Practice saying the words you've planned, out loud.
- Yes, really—practice saying the words, out loud! When I do this (like in my living room or in the car) I find the first try is usually halting with awkward spots. If I keep at it, it smooths out. Trust me, the smoothness and clarity will carry over into the dance and make you look great.

At the dance

- Consider recording yourself, and/or enlisting a caller buddy to listen and write down feedback ("When you said X, I saw a bunch of people do Y")
- (CO) The walkthrough should be brief and pleasant.
- After you say something, watch like crazy (everywhere) to see if everybody got it. Watching is **really important**! Not just one set, or just the top couples, but the entire hall. You have two goals here:
    1. Make sure everyone gets it well enough to not be struggling during the dance, meaning they—and you—will be happier.
    2. Evaluate the effectiveness of your words—most likely you'll notice places where some people look confused or do the wrong thing. Make a mental note to refine it for next time. And notice what works great so you can repeat it!
- If you've planned correctly you should never need more than 1-2 walkthroughs.
- (JP) One "extra" per walkthrough (if you've earned it)—e.g. style tip or anecdote.

Big picture

- (BH) Be the leader. A dance needs somebody making decisions. You can do it. Dancers grant you authority because it's the shortest way for them to get to dance. Tell the dancers what to do **boldly, clearly** and **unapologetically**. They want you to look, act, and be in charge. It makes the evening more pleasant for them.
- You get all the credit and all the blame. If a particular dance doesn't go well, either you picked the wrong dance or you need to figure out how to teach it more clearly. Never blame the dancers!
- It's great to be personal and funny, but it's a rare natural gift. We've all experienced feeling uncomfortable with a caller who is trying too hard. You can't go wrong sticking to the basics—good dances at an appropriate level taught clearly in a relaxed friendly way. As you get comfortable over many evenings your personality will emerge naturally.

For beginners, learn/evolve clear capsules for basic figures. Some of mine:

- Ladies chain: "Women take right hands and pull by. Gents take her left hand in yours and scoop her around with your right arm—you back up, she walks forward. That's called a courtesy turn."
- Right and left through: "Walk across the set, passing right shoulders with your opposite, and *stay facing out*. Now do a courtesy turn like in a ladies chain."
- Allemande: "Loop thumbs and close your hand", "Flexible tension, between a wet noodle and a vise grip", "Share a little weight" ("The thumb is not a souvenir!")
- Left-hand star: "Put your left hands in, hold the wrist in front of you."
- Hey: "A weaving figure; keep crossing the set, alternating which shoulder you pass." "Women cross, passing right shoulders; pass left with your neighbor; men cross, passing right shoulders; pass left with your partner" etc. (If numerous beginners, slow motion demo.)
- Swing: learn how to teach it well. Take 3-5 minutes to teach it when there are lots of beginners.